Big Time
Ray Brown’s Great Big Band revives a genre

If you wanted to go dancing in the 1930s, ’40s, and early ’50s, you went where the big bands were. But when rock ’n’ roll came along, young people turned to concerts rather than dance floors to get their groove on. These days, big bands are hard to find. They pose hefty logistical challenges, it’s near impossible to pay the musicians what they’re worth, and ballrooms are fewer and farther between—all realities that pose the question: are big bands an endangered species? Not if Ray Brown has anything to say about it.

A local jazz educator, composer, arranger, musician and bandleader, Brown is an anchor for jazz in Santa Cruz and a passionate advocate for big band music. His own Great Big Band is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year and shows no signs of slowing down. Named for both its size and the quality of its members, the band is a standout of the Bay Area jazz scene and a top-notch, 19-member strong, bona fide big band.

The Great Big Band, which took 15 years to put together, emerged out of Brown’s desire to focus his musical energy on a band of his own.

“I had been writing for other people for such a long time that I finally wanted to do it under my own name, with my own players,” he says. “It’s sort of like a carpenter doing his own kitchen rather than building kitchens for everybody else.”

The band’s book of material is written exclusively by Brown, who has a rich musical history, including writing for Count Basie and playing trumpet in Stan Kenton’s band. These days, Brown does more arranging than composing because, as he says, there are already so many wonderful standards and jazz tunes out there.

“Arranging is not like redecorating, like you would a house,” he says. “Arranging is like tearing a house down to its footprint and then remodeling it on whatever tune you’re doing. The tune would be the house footprint.”

Brown counts himself lucky that he was born into a musical family and credits not only his own introduction to jazz, but also that of generations of students, to his father Glenn Brown Sr., who played in Xavier Cugat’s Latin Band and was music supervisor for the Long Beach Public Schools in Long Island, New York. In his position overseeing music in the schools, he introduced jazz education and laid the musical foundation for countless kids.

Carrying on their father’s passion for jazz, both Brown and his brother Steve made careers of it and have spent the last 40 years as jazz educators in college systems.

Before Brown was a teacher, however, he had what would prove to be a life-altering opportunity to play with the legendary Kenton. He had just finished a stint in the Army and was days away from going back to school for his master’s degree when he got the call.

“Just before I was going to go to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign,” Brown explains, “Stan Kenton called and asked if I would like to play with his band.” He adds with a laugh, “Which I did.”

Brown says the 15 month experience with Kenton absolutely informs his own style. Unlike other big bands at the time, including Duke Ellington’s and Count Basie’s, which had eight brass instruments, Kenton had 10: five trombones and five trumpets. Brown picked up writing for 10 brass and never let it go. He also saw first-hand how to be a great bandleader.

With Kenton, Brown performed all over the U.S., Europe and Canada, and every night they would leave the audience wanting more. That way, the next time the band came through town they would fill the house.

Because of the logistical challenges of a big band, Brown’s Great Big Band plays only a handful of times each year, so keeping audiences wanting more is easy. When asked what the band is playing for its upcoming 25th anniversary celebration at Cabrillo College’s Crocker Theater, Brown says he’s still deciding. A few days ahead of time, he’ll finalize the song list and send it to the band. The band is so proficient that they can just sit down and read the selections, with minimal rehearsal.

A much-loved and respected member of the local music community, Brown raves about Santa Cruz as a hotbed for jazz.

“This is one of the greatest towns for jazz in the entire country,” he says. “Kuumbwa books nine or 10 months ahead of time because people want to play there. You can hear a pin drop in that place.” He adds, “There is no place like it, and I’ve played all over the world.”